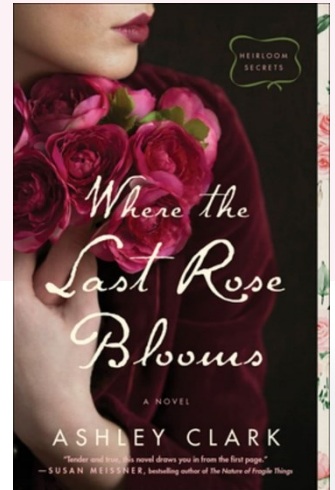




# LEADER'S GUIDE

## WHERE THE LAST ROSE BLOOMS BY ASHLEY CLARK



*"From the broken ground, somehow those delicate, vibrant petals came anew, offering a fragrance that might catch on the breeze and carry down the street to where the bluebirds flew. And that rosebush carries with it a heritage, too – from the ground where the last rose blooms."*

**CLARA ADELAIDE ABEL**

### THEMES

Redemption

Restoration

Espionage

Ethics

Sacrifice

Family

Strength

### HEADS UP! (TRIGGERS AND DELICATE TOPICS)

Slavery

War

Depression

Suicide

### CHARACTERS

*Clara Adelaide Abel* is a young heiress of a cotton empire on a journey of seeking to learn what is right and what is wrong. As she discerns in her heart that slavery is wrong, she begins questioning everything she's ever known about her life, family, and the world. She wants to use her position of power to do something more, but at age 16 and threatened with disownment, she is scared to commit to a cause openly. Her father is a part of the Confederacy, making her decision difficult. Yet, after witnessing a sick mother and baby fleeing slavery, she decides to not only side with the abolitionists but enter into espionage alongside Teddy.

*Theodore (Teddy)* lives in New York, but his heritage is the British high society. He is a passionate abolitionist and has become a spy alongside Oliver for the Union. Teddy has a strong sense of loyalty and right and wrong. He encourages Clara to "pick a side" and live accordingly.

*Mary and Oliver*, Clara's relatives and abolitionists, work to free and assist runaway enslaved people.

*Rose* is an enslaved woman owned by Clara's father and allocated as Clara's handmaid. Rose is a strong woman who has endured immeasurable pain but will not give up hope in finding her daughter Ashley. Rose confides in and trusts Clara, Oliver and Teddy to help her find her missing daughter.

*Ashley* was sold into slavery as a young girl and is desperate for her mama, Rose to find her. Her journal plays an important role in the future of putting the puzzle pieces of the story together.

*Alice* is a sweet and quirky florist who runs 'The Pricky Rose' bouquet shop alongside her aunt. Her mother disappeared after Hurricane Katrina, and she struggles with abandonment issues, believing both her mother and God have rejected her. Alice is a gifted florist and has a unique understanding of the Victorian Floral Language. She uses these skills to help piece together the story behind embroidered artifacts found in her family's attic that date back to the 1800s.

*Sullivan* comes across as both aloof and irresistibly attractive to Alice, but during the first encounter, he makes a poor impression. As time progresses and they work together running wedding errands for their mutual friends and piecing together the mystery of the floral embroideries, he tenderly grows in her affections. Journeying alongside Alice as she processes the grief and mystery surrounding her mother's disappearance, they begin to connect the stories and find friendship and joy in one another.

*Juliet* (Ashley's great-granddaughter) is also Alice's old next-door neighbour. She encourages Alice to use her skills to decipher the meaning behind the embroidered artifacts. Juliet has information about Alice's mother's disappearance, which gives Alice hope that she is still alive.

*Eliza* (a descendant of Clara) is the previous owner of Alice's childhood home. Being Juliet's neighbour, she links the families together again in the second timeline, and she hides the flower embroidery in the attic, which Alice later finds. Eliza is also Sullivan's relative, adding another layer of connectivity between the characters in the stories.

## STORYLINE

### Charleston, 1860s

When Clara, a young heiress to a cotton plantation and daughter to a well-known Confederate general, travels to visit her relatives, Oliver and Mary, on Edisto Island, she's confronted with a life-changing decision. As she accidentally comes upon Mary caring for an escaped enslaved woman with a sick baby, her heart breaks, and she realises she can no longer remain apathetic. She must decide whether she will continue to turn a blind eye to slavery and her family's abuse of fellow human beings or whether she will act on her discernment that slavery is wrong and side with the abolitionists. It is no easy decision, but when Teddy confronts her, she immediately decides that the sacrifice this choice requires of her is of no consequence compared to what Rose, her own enslaved servant and many others, have already endured.

Given that Clara's father and associates are heavily involved in the Confederacy, Teddy and Oliver consider her situation a unique opportunity to seek information and ask her to consider espionage for the Union. When Clara discovers that Rose has a daughter who was stolen from her, she decides she will do all in her power to help the Union – particularly helping Oliver and Teddy recover Rose's daughter – to sabotage the enemy's efforts.

Through Rose's beautiful floral embroidery, Clara secretly passes messages to Teddy and the Union through floral coding. After much success in passing information back and forth, Clara's efforts are exposed when a note with Teddy's declaration of love for her is discovered in her room. Immediately she and Rose spring into action and flee Charleston to her cousin Mary on Edisto Island. Upon arriving, she's presented with an opportunity to wed Teddy and escape with him to New York. Having fallen in love with Teddy, she agrees to the proposal, and she, Teddy and Rose flee before her father can find her.

Although she is now safe, her heart still yearns to reunite Rose and Ashley, and through the continued use of Rose's embroidery and floral code, she can help Rose and Ashley communicate, filling Rose with hope for the first time since Ashley was taken from her.

## New Orleans, Modern Day

Florist Alice meets Sullivan on a blind date. He makes a terrible first impression, but as their mutual close friends prepare to get married, they are thrown into running wedding errands together. Their relationship steadily blossoms into a sweet friendship, and as they build trust in one another, they quickly develop a romantic attachment. Alice and Sullivan have trust issues; Alice is battling with her mother's abandonment during Hurricane Katrina, while Sullivan has become sceptical of love after being cheated on. With the help of her previous next-door neighbour, Juliet, and Sullivan's encouragement, Alice embarks on a journey to seek her missing mother, while also attempting to uncover the story and meaning behind the floral embroidery she discovered in the attic of her old childhood home.

As the story unfolds, Alice realises that the embroidery was created by Rose (Juliet's late relative) and was used by Clara (Sullivan's ancestor) to transfer information secretly to the Union during the Civil War. Alice follows the clues to find her mother, who holds the missing ledger with the floral code to decipher the embroidered artifacts. As the story wraps up, Alice begins to heal from her mother's abandonment, learns to trust God's love for her, and falls in love with Sullivan, all the while connecting the missing pieces of Clara and Rose's story – and the connections it has to so many cherished friends in her life now.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & TALKING POINTS

1

Q. "Flowers are a symbol of femininity - how that which is delicate can also be strong" (p9). Many of the women in 'Where the Rose Blooms' show incredible strength. Which character did you relate to the most? Why?

### TALKING POINTS

We may connect to a character for the following reasons;

- We feel empathy or sympathy for their circumstances.
- We share similar character traits or personalities.
- We share similar desires, hopes, or dreams.
- We have made similar mistakes or poor decisions in our own lives.
- We like or dislike particular characters because of our experiences with others.

2

Q. Which timeline, New Orleans Modern Day or Charleston 1860s, did you most enjoy? Why?

### TALKING POINTS

Dual-timeline stories are becoming increasingly popular. The separate storylines, which form a larger narrative, add cliffhangers and suspense at the end of each chapter as we journey back and forth between times and characters. We may have enjoyed one timeline more than another because of;

- The romance between characters; Teddy and Clara or Sullivan and Alice.
- The historical facts; espionage methods or events such as the fires which altered the course of the war.
- The rom-com vibes from the Modern Day timeline.
- The mystery behind Alice's missing mother.

# 3

Q. We're blessed to live in the twenty-first century, where the equality gap between men and women has significantly shrunk. What shocked you most about the attitudes towards women in the 1860s?

## TALKING POINTS

Some examples of oppression and lack of regard towards women in the novel are;

- It was commonly thought that women's minds were incapable of processing and understanding the harsh realities of the world (p138).
- A women's value was found purely in her service to her husband and home.
- A woman who read was frowned upon.
- Women were unable to vote or have an opinion that was valued.
- Most occupations were closed to women; they were not expected to work.

It's important to remember that although women in Australia enjoy many freedoms and the same rights as men, there are still many places in the world where girls and women still suffer horrendous abuse and oppression. There remains a long way to go in providing God-honouring equal opportunities between the sexes.

# 4

Q. The Victorian language of flowers plays a significant role in the story. What intrigued you most about this method of espionage?

## TALKING POINTS

We're first introduced to the Victorian language of flowers on page 53 as Alice discusses the "secret spy code" with a customer. Flowers have been used to;

- Send messages of war or hostility.
- Send messages of love and commitment.
- In this story, a ledger was used for deciphering the floral code; the flowers represented people, events and places.

# 5

Q. On page 43, Clara realises that she must take a side; she can no longer live apathetically. Discuss.

## TALKING POINTS

As a group, you may like to consider the following things;

- How have Christians (in general) failed or succeeded in response to racism and inequality?
- Is it biblical to do nothing?
- What will we teach our children through our actions or inaction?

Biblical examples;

- In the book of Jeremiah, the Israelites are charged with the sin of neglecting the care of orphans, widows, the poor, the oppressed, and the sick.
- Paul's letter to Philemon is a plea for Onesimus, a runaway slave, to be forgiven and accepted as a brother in Christ. "If you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me" Phil 1:17.

Please anticipate a passionate discussion on this issue. It is OK for your group to share different opinions and experiences so long as the conversation is kept life-giving. If it begins to get heated, or

two individuals are arguing different viewpoints and dominating the conversation, move on by suggesting they continue the conversation at a later stage.

6

Q. On page 110, Juliet says, "People deserve to know the whole truth about their families, no matter how painful it may be". Do you agree?

### TALKING POINTS

Many of us view our families and friends through rose-coloured glasses. It's easier to assume the best of those we love, or turn a blind eye to their faults, instead of facing the harsh realities that they, too, are sinful people – just as we are ourselves.

In the novel, both Clara and Alice need to accept brutal truths about their families;

- "Clara's thoughts began to race as she realized that her own father, her own family, was the captor in this situation and that Rose, whom she loved so dearly, could have just as easily been the young, fragile mother in the other room" (p44).
- "I have reason to believe your mother is alive... it quickly became apparent to me she planned on jumping [off the bridge]... Depression is an ugly thing" (pages 108-109).

7

Q. Clara loves Jane Austen novels. Which Jane Austen novel is your favourite? Why?

### TALKING POINTS

- Jane Austen wrote six complete novels;
- Sense and Sensibility
- Pride and Prejudice
- Mansfield Park
- Emma
- Northanger Abbey
- Persuasion

(If there are members present who have not yet experienced the joy of reading an Austen novel, encourage them to do so.)

8

Q. Alice, in her distress, wonders, "Where is God in all of this?" (p104). How can we trust God is present in our grief, even if we can't *feel* His presence?

### TALKING POINTS

"It's hard to explain how it feels... when everything in your life is going according to plan and then suddenly the ground opens up beneath you. You doubt everything about yourself, everything you've always believed in – why God would let this happen, and why He would have abandoned you" - Alice (p90).

Sometimes our suffering seems too much to bear, and we may become heartbroken or begin to distrust the Lord. God intends to grow us during suffering and for us to seek our peace, joy and hope from Him, ultimately maturing our faith. This is a challenging process and is only made possible through the faithfulness of Christ, who promises to finish His good work in us. A few truths we can remember to give us hope are;

- God PROMISES never to leave us or fail us (Hebrews 13:5); despite our feelings, we can declare with confidence, "The Lord is my helper, so I will have no fear." (Hebrews 13:6).
- Trials and suffering join us in Christ's suffering.

- Trials develop endurance, endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation (Romans 5:4).
- Trials refine us and reveal the areas of our hearts that need attention.
- If we allow them, trials help us to be conformed to the image of Christ.

If there is someone in the group in this dark place, pray that the Lord would show them His enduring love, that He would help them to forgive and heal and rest in the hope of heaven.

## 9

Q. "Let's just say, I don't like a story without an ending" (p126). Can you relate to Alice's need to know or control things?

### TALKING POINTS

The need to control or know things are often connected to fear and lies from the enemy;

- Fear of not having our expectations met, of not being loved, welcomed, or accepted, of feeling not good enough or imagining the worst-case scenario of things going wrong.
- Lies such as; God is only faithful when we are faithful, God will only forgive me once I get my act together, or God's favour for me isn't certain.

Fear and the need to control things are overcome with freedom;

- We need to acknowledge the enemy's lies and attacks on our lives but focus on renewing our minds through Christ and His truth.
- It's not enough to expose the lie; we must also renew our minds.
- "The good life isn't the absence of heartache; it's the presence of God, by grace, in the midst of it. Our hope in the midst of hardship is that Jesus doesn't work things out for our good – he is our good" – Ruth Chou Simons, *When Striving Cease*, p183.
- Christ is the one who holds all things together; we will never be enough to save ourselves, and this is why Christ came.
- Knowing Christ is enough allows us to loosen our grip on things we're trying to control.
- If the God who created the universe - who loves us more than we love ourselves – is in control, we can rest in, trust and surrender to His plans.
- He doesn't promise that His plans for our lives are the easy way but promises that they are what's best for us.
- Hard doesn't equal bad.

## 10

Q. On page 113, Ashley says, "Maybe we all got a bigger story." Discuss.

### TALKING POINTS

"Brokenness abounds – it is the state of the world...But if we look hard enough, we can find spaces pierced by a needle. When threaded together, they create something beautiful – a story, our story, and through the threads and the holes, we grow" (p111).;

- "For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are high than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts" – Isaiah 55:9.
- "Cause and effect are in God's hands. Is it not part of the faith simply to let them rest there? God is God. I dethrone Him in my heart if I demand that He act in ways that satisfy my idea of justice... I believe with all my heart that God's story has a happy ending... But not yet" – Elisabeth Elliot.

- Kneeling to God's sovereign will (whether we believe God ordains, allows or sends trials and suffering), gives us a song of praise to sing that our circumstances can't change. It provides us with comfort and peace and reassures our weary and lamenting hearts that ALL wrongs will be made right in the second coming and judgement of Jesus.



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